What MORE Is There To Say About 'Alice'?

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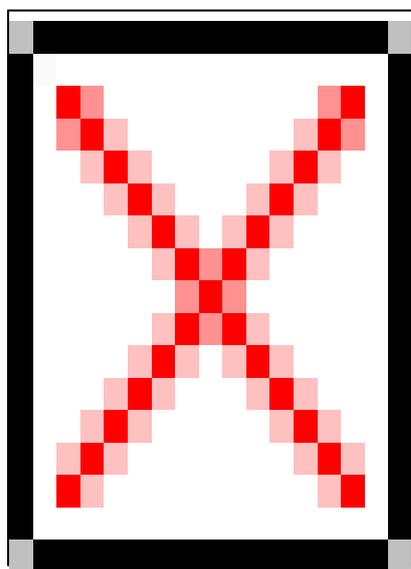
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243 [2]

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Peter Hunt reflects on writing another book about Lewis Carroll?s **Alice** books

*Lewis Carroll?s ?Alice? Books have had a remarkable fascination for readers the world over; not only have there been over 9,000 editions in 174 languages, but there are countless books **about** them. **Peter Hunt** reflects on writing yet another.*

What interests people about famous children?s books can be bewildering. Was Enid Blyton a bad mother? Was Dumbledore gay? In the case of the most famous children?s books of all, **Alice?s Adventures in Wonderland** and **Through the Looking-Glass** this kind of interest generally seems to involve a trial *in absentia* of Charles Dodgson over his relationship with Alice Liddell and other little girls (with a great deal about missing and mutilated diary entries and Dodgson?s photographic habits).

Which is a pity because the ?Alice? books are the complex product of a complex mind, and can tell us a great deal about Victorian culture, and the intricacies of writing for children. Dodgson, beginning with a personal story for a little girl, then developed and layered it and its sequel with local jokes, political satire, personal preoccupations, and mathematical oddities ? indeed, both books are extended games, which may now, increasingly, be more interesting for adults to play than for children.
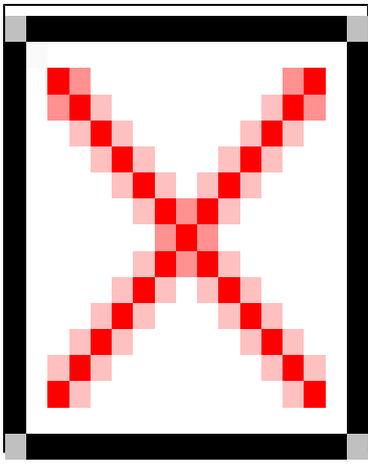
And so my new book about these books is about things that most people *don?t* know about the *books* ? as opposed to what they know, or think they know, about the *private lives* involved.

For example: take Friday, 4th July, 1862, a ?golden afternoon? so well known that it is still celebrated as Alice Day in Oxford. Two junior academics, Charles Dodgson and his friend Robinson Duckworth rowed the three young daughters of Dean Liddell of Christ Church (the Oxford college known as ?the house?) up, or possibly down, the river. Dodgson made up a story, and Alice, number two daughter, asked him to write it down. Of course, as many people know, this is at least partly a myth: it was actually raining that day; and Dodgson added the reference to the story in his diary as an afterthought, and later admitted that it was ?made up almost wholly of bits and scraps? from stories, ?like summer midges?, told on several such trips.

But probably very few people know that such excursions were commonplace in Oxford: junior staff frequently took the children of their superiors for excursions (probably for politic reasons); or that Duckworth became Chaplain-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria, officiated at Charles Darwin?s funeral, and was so distinguished that he was buried in Westminster Abbey. That boat was almost a microcosm of a deeply intertwined set of cultural contacts.

These are fascinating ?bits and scraps?, and I begin with the detritus of books already in Dodgson?s mind when he began to write. His cheerful parodies of Isaac Watts (?How doth the little crocodile?), or Jane Taylor (?Twinkle, Twinkle, little bat?) are familiar enough, but there are also traces in the ?Alice? books of cautionary tales, of Punch and Judy, and of pantomimes. Dodgson saw the pantomime **Harlequin King Chess or Tom the Piper?s Son and See-Saw Marjery Daw** at the Surrey Theatre in 1865, with its final act of a game of chess with live players, just as he was beginning to assemble **Through the Looking Glass**.

He was not above working out his own little vendettas: he had fallen out with Tennyson, author of ?Maud,? a poem that features a garden of talking flowers:

The larkspur listens, ?I hear, I hear? ?

She is coming, my own, my sweet;

Were it ever so airy a tread ?

In **Through the Looking-Glass** Alice and the flowers are listening for the Red Queen: ??She?s coming!? cried the Larkspur: ?I hear her footstep, thump, thump, along the gravel walk.??
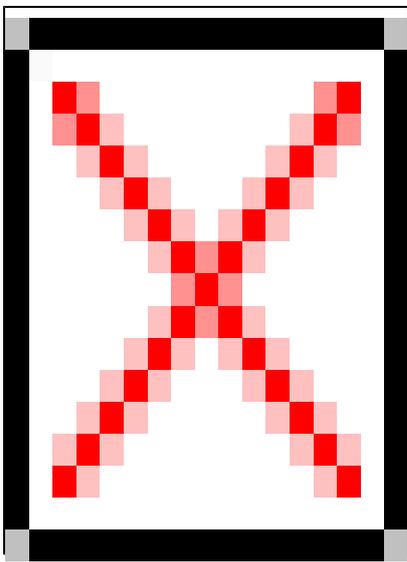
The extent of Dodgson?s magpie mind is brilliantly demonstrated by the resemblance of the Red Queen?s garden to**La Bataille des Cartes** (1844) by the French satirical cartoonist J.J. Grandville (1803?1847) who worked for the Parisian magazine **Le Charivari** (and influenced John Tenniel).

With all this floating around in his head, Dodgson began by packing his story with personalised nonsense for the Liddell sisters. When Alice falls down the rabbit hole, she reflects ??Why, I wouldn?t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!? (Which was most likely true.)? And to a Christ Church girl, there was really only one ?house?. She and her sisters would have recognised the croquet games, the caricature of John Ruskin as the ?drawling master?, the treacle well at Binsey, and much else.

As the book developed, Dodgson layered in his satirical targets. Look at Tenniel?s drawing of the mad tea party: the Hatter is probably Dean Liddell; the Dormouse is Thomas John Prout, the rector of Binsey, well known for dozing off in meetings; and the March Hare, is one of Dodgson?s intellectual enemies, the broad church socialist Julius Charles Hare, Archdeacon of Lewes.

Which brings us to debates philosophical. On 30 June 1860, Dodgson bought a two- guinea ticket to a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at the new Oxford Museum. This turned into a famous confrontation between Thomas Huxley (who Dodgson later photographed) and Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford (who ordained Dodgson) over Charles Darwin?s newly published theories of natural selection. Dodgson was caught between religious orthodoxy and interest in new ideas, so it is not surprising that the over-enthusiastic puppy that Alice encounters (possibly a beagle) bears a curious resemblance to Darwin. And can it be chance that Alice hides behind ?a great thistle?, while one of Dodgson?s colleagues was Sir William Turner Thiselton-Dyer (1843?1928), who ended his career as Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, became a friend of Charles Darwin, and married Thomas Huxley?s daughter, Harriet?

So, what went on in Dodgson?s head was, to say the least, convoluted ? and never more so than in his fascination with numbers. The classic example is his fixation with the number 42: **Alice** has 42 illustrations; the oldest rule in the King?s book is 42; Alice?s age in **Looking Glass** is seven years and six months (7x6=42). And if you think that this is mere coincidence, consider the White Queen?s age. ?I am,? she tells Alice, ?just one hundred and one, five months and a day.? That remarkable Alice scholar, Edward Wakeling, has worked out that if you count the days that the White Queen has been alive, up to 4 November 1859 (the date when the book is set) ? not forgetting leap years ? the total is 37,044: doubling that (there are two Queens, and as they are in the same set, they must be the same age) makes 74,088 ? and 74,088 just happens (?) to be 42 x 42 x 42.

Dodgson was not the first (or last) author to discover that a lot can be hidden in a children?s book, and, ironist that he was, it did not much matter to him if anyone understood any of it. And so, once we are down the rabbit-hole we can only follow passages, open doors, chase rabbits: in effect, join in Charles Dodgson?s games ? and, after all, playing games is

what children?s books are about.

Peter Hunt is Emeritus Professor of Children?s Literature at Cardiff University. **The Making of Lewis Carroll?s Alice and the Invention of Wonderland** **[3]** is published by the Bodleian Library in June. £15.

Page Number:
14

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